



PROJECT MUSE®

*Public Spectacles of Violence: Sensational Cinema and
Journalism in Early Twentieth-Century Mexico and Brazil* by
Rielle Navitski (review)

Georgina Torello, Laura Isabel Serna

Cinema Journal, Volume 57, Number 4, Summer 2018, pp. 166-169 (Review)

Published by University of Texas Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2018.0065>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/699808>

essay “The Diary Film.” Taken as a whole, these comparative observations speak to the fluidity of practice and a knowledge that stems from the inherent disorder of film practices that continuously evolve and obstinately refuse to stay within concrete conceptual lines.

In assembling *The Documentary Film Reader* and *Essays on the Essay Film*, Kahana, Alter, and Corrigan have performed tremendous acts of scholarly service. Both volumes present a rich mosaic of writing on film form, politics, and practice that order the discursive field while still allowing the unruly documentary construct room to breathe. These are thought-provoking anthologies that demand to be returned to again and again, separately and side by side. *

Public Spectacles of Violence: Sensational Cinema and Journalism in Early Twentieth-Century Mexico and Brazil

by Rielle Navitski. Duke University Press, 2017. \$104.95 hardcover. \$27.95 paper. Also available in e-book. 344 pages.

reviewed by GEORGINA TORELLO
translated by LAURA ISABEL SERNA

Even before opening the pages of *Public Spectacles of Violence: Sensational Cinema and Journalism in Early Twentieth-Century Mexico and Brazil* the reader is met with an image of violence on the cover: in front of a wall, three uniformed men stand, rifles in hand pointed downward. A mass execution seems to have just taken place. A palpable sense of immediacy heightens the drama and impact of the image and is augmented by the men’s silhouetted repetition, the regular distance between them, and the notable oblique angle. They resemble a deadly assembly line. This still, from the serial film based on real events and Mexican cinema’s first box-office hit, *El automóvil gris* (The gray automobile; Enrique Rosas, 1919), effectively synthesizes the primary objective of the book, as it alludes to the intricate relationship between the documentary representation of violence and its fictional construction in cinema. And, of



PUBLIC SPECTACLES OF VIOLENCE

*Sensational Cinema and Journalism in
Early Twentieth-Century Mexico and Brazil*

RIELLE NAVITSKI

course, it gestures toward the reception or consumption of this violence as a problem contemporary to the film's release but also, undoubtedly, a problem today.

In effect, the multiple representations of crime that the Mexican and Brazilian press and cinema produced during the first three decades of the twentieth century interpellated their audiences and continue to interpellate the reader and contemporary viewers in various ways. Navitski presents an extremely provocative hypothesis: the everyday violence perpetrated in the principal cities of Mexico and Brazil at the beginning of the twentieth century was thought about, represented, and reelaborated through new cultural forms (yellow journalism, illustrated newspapers and magazines, theater, and film) as an unequivocal mark of the increasing participation of those countries in global modernity. Ironically, as Navitski suggests, in the cultural imaginary of the time, the risky robbery or ferocious crime tied Mexico City, São Paulo, and Rio de Janeiro to London, Berlin, and Paris with an indelible red thread. One of the most intriguing points, developed by the author via a careful analysis of police blotters and general discussions of crime in the press, is the idea that the progressive sophistication of the crimes functioned as an index of increasing modernization. Positivism and its logic of progress appear in this way, inverted and distorted.

On the basis of a thorough examination of historical sources including the press, images, and film, Navitski explores representations of violence as different forms of "popular sensationalism," a term she uses to describe widely circulating cultural representations constructed to generate a heightened sensual or moral reception in the public.¹ These representations, she argues, were based principally on widely disseminated imported models like the serialized novel (or *folletín*) and the film serial. For the author, the use of primarily American or French models implies not servile imitation (a point on which she challenges the existing scholarship) but rather a conscious and specific appropriation on the part of receiving countries. This process can be seen, for example, in the fusion of Hollywood's image of the *bandido* with that of the Mexican *charro* (cattle wrangler) in adventure films such as *El Zorro* (Miguel Contreras Torres, 1920) and *El caporal* (The foreman; Miguel Contreras Torres and Rafael Bermúdez Zatarain, 1921) or in the influence of French crime serials on *Os mistérios de Rio de Janeiro* (The mysteries of Rio de Janeiro; Henrique Coelho Neto and Alfredo Musso, 1917), which made film a platform for exhibiting the city's sensational, ultramodern crimes. In this sense Navitski takes up Ben Singer's modernity thesis, which proposes that cinema in general, and especially sensational cinema, not only demonstrated but also shaped the profound transformation of social lives and perception.² Navitski argues that it is imperative to consider precarious industrialization as a significant variable when thinking about the modernity thesis in relationship to Latin America. Navitski suggests that the autochthonous forms of mass sensationalism were not simply "mimetic responses to the experience of modernization" but also a result of adjustments, revisions, and resistance.³ One of the most notable examples

1 Rielle Navitski, *Public Spectacles of Violence: Sensational Cinema and Journalism in Early Twentieth-Century Mexico and Brazil* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 2.

2 Navitski, *Public Spectacles*, 15.

3 Navitski, *Public Spectacles*, 15.

she explores is the production of Mexican “revenge” films that—even if they did not abandon the violent style of their hegemonic models, which included Hollywood films—fought and responded actively to the negative stereotypes about Mexicans that Hollywood regularly offered. While discussing the existing theoretical literature and criticism, the author also proposes shifts in focus at each step; such care marks the rich articulation of this book not only with its object of study but also with the voices that have preceded it. See, for example, Navitski’s nuancing of Miriam Hansen’s concept of the global vernacular, or how she questions the emphasis on the revolution that marks the literature on photography and early Mexican cinema, not to mention her proposal of a reading of sensational cinema and journalism that acknowledges continuities in the display of violence.⁴

Like the image on its cover, the book is well balanced and symmetrical. It is structured in two parts, each more or less equal in length, dedicated to Mexico and Brazil, respectively. This enables the reader to follow the two principal, shared modalities of the representation of crime identified by the author. The first mode, which Navitski designates “violent actualities” because of an aesthetic that hews closely to that of early cinema, emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century and continued through the 1920s. These films consist of the cinematic registering of violent episodes, in particular those that might have been featured in the so-called *notas rojas* (red notes)—journalistic accounts of sensational, violent crimes aimed at the lower classes—or their later reconstruction. In the case of Mexico, as Navitski indicates by distancing herself from previous approaches to early cinema in that country, these films can be read in terms of their continuity with the cultures of violence of the Porfirian, revolutionary, and later postrevolutionary eras. The author lingers, to illustrate this approach, on the analysis of the paradigmatic films *El automóvil gris* and *La banda del automóvil* (The automobile gang; Ernesto Vollrath, 1919). In the case of Brazil she examines *Os estranguladores* (The stranglers; Antonio Leal, 1908), *A mala sinistra* (The sinister trunk; Júlio Ferrez, 1908), and *O crime da mala* (The crime of the trunk; Alberto Botelho, 1908), to illustrate the presence and success of sensational real-life cases in the earliest narrative film productions.

“Sensational fictions,” the second mode, weaves together diverse violent narratives about crimes, robberies, kidnappings, and rapes. Such stories are heirs of foreign serial films, cinematic novels, and serial stories published by local magazines and newspapers. This mode faded away, in the Mexican case, with productions such as *El tren fantasma* (The ghost train; Gabriel García Moreno, 1926) and *El puño de hierro* (The iron fist; Gabriel García Moreno, 1927), which reelaborated the conventions of Hollywood westerns by recasting them within the frame of Mexican territory, “nationalizing” the discourse, if you like, through a focus on the deployment of natural settings and their mediatic propaganda. In the Brazilian case, in films such as *Os mistérios do Rio de Janeiro* or *A quadrilha do esqueleto* (The skeleton gang; Eduardo Arouca and Carlos Comelli, 1917), the forms of imported written and film serials dialogue, yet again, with exterior shooting in local, dangerous, but modern sites of these Brazilian metropolises. In the final chapter in the Brazilian section, Navitski moves beyond urban centers such as

4 Navitski, *Public Spectacles*, 12–13, 38–46.

Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo to offer a wide-ranging analysis of the semiamateur production in the Brazilian periphery. These films demonstrate a tension not only between the foreign and the local but also between the metropolis and the interior of the country. And here the author returns, as she does throughout the book, to a careful analysis of the sensationalist press and examples of the incipient film criticism, establishing points of departure and connection with cinema production.

This structure, which clearly separates the two countries, is one of the many strengths of the book, as Navitski traces the specificities of each case in her treatment of the capturing, representing, re-creating, witnessing, or reading of violence in print or on the screen. This is not to say that the book confines itself to independent readings—in fact the continuities between the practices of both countries are pointed out frequently.

The book opens a series of key questions that will undoubtedly stimulate responses from scholars of other parts of the continent. A topic that might require further exploration concerns the modalities in which the equation between crime and modernity articulated in urban centers in Europe or the United States show similarities to those developed in Mexico and Brazil. Nevertheless, these avenues for further research do not in any sense detract from the overall effectiveness of the book. In fact, Navitski's rich study, which is simultaneously comparative and national in its scope, proves a great complement to transnational approaches to silent cinema in Latin America, a field that has recently demonstrated its vitality, in part thanks to restoration projects that made available films previously inaccessible to scholars. Last, it is necessary to emphasize that while *Public Spectacles of Violence* is essential for scholars of Latin American cinema, even outside its specific field it offers conceptual and methodological tools that students and scholars of cinema, cultural studies, or history might use to approach the eternally resonant topic of violence and its symbolic representation. *